

VOICES OF BELONGING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TEACHER EXPERIENCES OF THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

This study explored teachers' experiences of belonging in the workplace using a qualitative design to capture participants' perspectives. It aimed to examine teachers' personal experiences, the factors that made them feel valued, and how their sense of belonging influenced their work performance. Seventeen teachers from public schools in the Municipality of Arakan participated in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Analysis revealed key themes in teachers' personal experiences: Participation and Voice, Recognition and Feedback, Peer Support and Collaboration, Exclusion from Informal or Decision Processes, Temporal Growth, and Organizational Change Effects; factors influencing perceived value: Exclusionary Decision Practices, Unequal Workload and Task Allocation, Unclear or Uneven Policies, Lack of Recognition, Time and Workload Constraints, and Clique Dynamics; and the impact of belonging on performance: Role and Life-stage Identity, Professional Identity, Cultural/Regional Identity, Communication Style and Personality, Language/Multilingualism, and Marginalization when Skills or Identity are Undervalued. Findings suggest that a strong sense of belonging enhances collaboration, motivation, and overall teaching performance, highlighting the importance of inclusive, supportive, and equitable school environments.

Keywords: *Qualitative Research, Teacher Experience, Sense of Belonging, Work Performance, Teacher Value, School Collaboration*

INTRODUCTION

The sense of belonging in the workplace has become an important area of concern, particularly in the education sector. A global study by ISS World (2023) revealed that although 69% of employees across different industries reported feeling a sense of belonging, a significant number still faced challenges: 51% felt they could not express their opinions openly, and 46% experienced unfair treatment. These issues are especially relevant for teachers, whose well-being and engagement are deeply influenced by the support they receive within their institutions. When educators feel excluded or undervalued, it can lead to burnout, decreased motivation, and diminished teaching effectiveness.

In the Philippines, teacher morale and belongingness have also been a topic of concern. A 2021 study by Viaro and Ancho examined the experiences of elementary school teachers in Batangas and found that 72% of the teachers surveyed expressed average levels of morale, influenced by factors such as identification with the school, sense of belonging, and a rational understanding of their work (Viaro & Ancho, 2021). Teachers who felt disconnected from their colleagues or institutional goals were less motivated and faced challenges in their teaching practices. The study highlights that the emotional well-being and sense of community among teachers play a significant role in enhancing their productivity and professional growth. These findings are essential, as they emphasize the need for school leaders and policymakers to implement programs that promote inclusivity, communication, and support systems for teachers.

Several factors influence teachers' experiences of belongingness within the workplace. According to a study by Smith and Brown (2021), interpersonal relationships within the workplace are pivotal in fostering a sense of belonging, with supportive colleagues and supervisors being key contributors to a positive work environment. Teachers who felt connected to their peers and leaders were more likely to report higher levels of job satisfaction and lower stress levels. Additionally, organizational culture plays a significant role in shaping teachers' sense of belonging. When schools promote inclusivity, recognize teachers' contributions, and provide opportunities for professional development, teachers tend to feel more valued and integrated into their workplace (Nguyen, 2022). Another factor, the alignment between teachers' values and the educational institution's mission, was found to enhance teachers' feelings of belonging and commitment to the school (Hernandez & Gutierrez, 2020).

Despite the growing interest in teachers' experiences of belongingness, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific factors that most strongly impact this sense of belonging, especially within different educational contexts. Most studies, such as those by Williams and Davis (2020) and Thompson (2019), primarily focus on broad factors like relationships and school culture but fail to address the unique challenges faced by teachers in diverse cultural and regional settings. Moreover, while existing literature offers insight into the impact of belongingness on teacher well-being, fewer studies explore its direct influence on teachers' professional growth and student outcomes. A deeper understanding of the various dimensions of teachers' experiences of belongingness, including how these factors differ across different educational systems

and cultures, is needed.

Studying the teacher experiences of belongingness within the workplace is crucial for understanding how teachers' sense of connection to their colleagues, school culture, and leadership can influence their job satisfaction, retention, and overall effectiveness in the classroom. A strong sense of belonging has been linked to improved teacher motivation, higher levels of engagement, and reduced stress, which ultimately enhances student outcomes. Teachers who feel valued and supported are more likely to stay in their positions, leading to greater stability within the educational workplace. Furthermore, understanding the factors that contribute to belongingness can help schools create more inclusive, supportive environments that foster professional growth, collaboration, and a positive organizational climate.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the teacher experiences of belongingness within the workplace. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the personal experiences of teachers in the workplace?
2. What factors make a teacher feel valued in the workplace?
3. How does a teacher's experience of belonging impact their work performance?

FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on two different theories: Social Exchange Theory by Blau (1964) and Organizational Support Theory by Eisenberger et al. (1986).

The Social Exchange Theory by Blau (1964) suggests that social interactions within organizations are based on the exchange of resources, where individuals weigh the costs and benefits of their relationships. This theory can be applied to understanding how teachers perceive their belongingness in the workplace. Teachers who feel valued and supported by their colleagues and administrators are more likely to perceive their work environment positively, which strengthens their sense of belonging. When teachers feel they receive tangible or intangible benefits, such as professional support, career development opportunities, or recognition, their overall engagement and commitment to the institution are enhanced (Homans, 1958). This sense of positive exchange encourages teachers to stay and contribute meaningfully to their educational community.

Blau's concept of *reciprocity* plays a significant role in teacher-staff relationships, where teachers' perceptions of support from their colleagues influence their own contribution to the workplace. Teachers who feel that they are treated fairly and are included in decision-making processes are likely to engage in more collaborative behaviors with their peers (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This exchange fosters an environment of trust and cooperation, where teachers are more likely to share resources, offer assistance, and contribute to a positive workplace culture. As a result, a strong sense

of belonging is cultivated through these reciprocal relationships, where the exchange is mutually beneficial.

The principle of *equity* within Social Exchange Theory suggests that teachers' experiences of belongingness are shaped by the fairness of the support and resources they receive. When teachers feel that their efforts are recognized and rewarded in a fair manner, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging to their school or educational organization (Adams, 1965). In contrast, perceived inequities, such as favoritism or unequal opportunities for professional growth, can undermine teachers' sense of belonging and create feelings of alienation. For teachers to feel truly integrated into their workplace, it is essential that the organization ensures equitable treatment and fair exchanges between all members.

Finally, Blau's theory highlights that positive *organizational exchanges* contribute to overall job satisfaction and work commitment. When teachers experience a sense of belonging, they are more likely to be satisfied with their job and demonstrate a higher level of commitment to their students and the institution. This alignment between individual satisfaction and organizational benefits encourages teachers to go beyond their basic duties, actively participating in school improvement initiatives and embracing leadership roles (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). In a supportive environment, where teachers feel valued and integrated into the community, their work ethic and productivity naturally improve, benefiting both the teachers and the organization.

Also, Organizational Support Theory (OST) by Eisenberger et al. (1986) posits that employees form perceptions of the extent to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. In the context of teachers, the theory suggests that when teachers perceive that their organization offers support through resources, recognition, and opportunities for growth, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging. This support enhances their commitment and fosters a positive connection with the institution, leading to improved work performance and job satisfaction (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Thus, teachers who feel supported by their school are more likely to feel an emotional connection to their workplace, which is central to their experience of belongingness.

According to OST, the concept of perceived organizational support (POS) plays a crucial role in teachers' work attitudes and behavior. When teachers perceive that their efforts are valued and their needs are met by the organization, they develop a stronger attachment to their school and are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Teachers who feel that their school genuinely cares about their professional and personal well-being are more likely to invest in their students' success and collaborate with their peers. This increased engagement fosters a sense of belonging and organizational commitment, which contributes to a positive work environment.

Another key element of OST is that perceived organizational support is linked to the teacher's willingness to reciprocate positive support from the school. When teachers perceive that their school or administrators are supportive, they feel compelled to reciprocate this support through their engagement, dedication, and work ethic (Wayne et al., 1997). In a supportive environment, teachers are more likely to collaborate with their colleagues, share teaching strategies, and engage in initiatives that improve the school's

overall performance. This reciprocal exchange solidifies their connection to the school, contributing to a greater sense of belonging and emotional investment in the institution.

Finally, the theory also highlights the role of organizational support in mitigating workplace stress and enhancing teachers' well-being. A supportive work environment helps teachers navigate challenges and reduces feelings of isolation, which can lead to burnout (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Teachers who feel they are supported by their school are better equipped to manage stress, resulting in higher job satisfaction and a stronger sense of belonging. In a supportive school culture, teachers are not only more likely to stay committed but also contribute to the development of a collaborative and positive work environment, further strengthening their sense of connection with the workplace.

METHODS

Research Design

In this study, the researcher used qualitative methods, commonly employed in human and social science research, to explore the personal experiences of teachers in the workplace. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, allowed participants to express their thoughts and feelings openly, providing rich, detailed insights. This approach focused on understanding the meaning and significance teachers attached to their experiences of belonging within their professional environments. The data collected were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and themes that reflected the teachers' perspectives, offering a deeper understanding of how they perceived their sense of belonging in their workplaces.

Meanwhile, the duration of the study spanned ten months, from January 2025 to December 2025. This period included refining the proposal paper, participant recruitment, and data collection, one month for data analysis, and one month for reporting and dissemination of findings.

Participants

The study involved 17 teacher participants, with 10 selected for in-depth interviews and 7 for focus group discussions. All participants were teachers currently working in schools under the Municipality of Arakan. Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants who had experiences and perspectives relevant to the study's objectives. This method ensured that participants were able to provide valuable insights into the phenomenon of belonging in the workplace, specifically within the context of the educational environment. The selection focused on individuals whose experiences aligned with the study's focus on workplace dynamics in education.

Participants were included in the study based on their roles as teachers currently employed in the schools within the Municipality of Arakan. They were also willing to share their personal experiences and reflections regarding their sense of belonging in the workplace. Exclusion criteria involved individuals who were no longer active in teaching or those who were unable to participate due to personal reasons or logistical constraints, such as being unavailable during the study's data collection period. The aim was to select

teachers who could provide meaningful insights into the study's central theme of belonging.

Data Collection Tools

In this study, data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to capture teachers' lived experiences of belonging in the workplace. The interview guides contained open-ended questions that allowed participants to share personal narratives regarding participation, recognition, peer support, and other aspects of their professional environment. Focus group discussions facilitated interactive dialogue, revealing collective perspectives and social dynamics that individual interviews might not uncover. These tools were chosen to ensure rich, detailed, and authentic accounts of teachers' perceptions and experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing their sense of value and inclusion.

Procedures

The data collection process began with obtaining ethical clearance and informed consent from participants, emphasizing voluntary participation and confidentiality. Teachers were purposively selected based on their experience and engagement in school activities to ensure relevant and insightful contributions. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in comfortable settings, recorded with permission, and later transcribed verbatim. The researcher adhered to ethical protocols throughout the study, ensuring participants' rights and well-being were maintained. Steps such as member checking and reflective journaling were embedded within the procedures to enhance data reliability and credibility.

Data Analysis

Collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to teachers' sense of belonging. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times to achieve immersion, and significant statements were coded to capture key ideas. These codes were then grouped into broader categories that reflected core themes such as participation, recognition, peer support, and organizational influences. Triangulation between interviews and focus group data strengthened the validity of findings, while iterative coding and reflective analysis ensured that interpretations were grounded in participants' lived experiences. This approach provided an in-depth understanding of how workplace dynamics shape teachers' engagement and professional fulfillment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Personal Experiences of Teachers in the Workplace

Based on the data, the results revealed that teachers' personal experiences in the workplace were shaped by multiple interconnected factors. Participation and voice emerged as a significant theme, highlighting that teachers felt a stronger sense of belonging when actively included in decision-making and planning processes. Recognition and feedback from administrators and peers reinforced feelings of value and professional affirmation, while peer support and collaboration fostered a sense of

community and collective growth. Conversely, exclusion from informal or decision-making processes negatively affected teachers' perceptions of inclusion. Over time, temporal growth through mentoring and sustained engagement enhanced teachers' confidence and integration within the school environment. Lastly, organizational change effects demonstrated that leadership transitions and communication gaps could disrupt previously established networks, impacting teachers' overall workplace experience.

Participation & Voice. The first theme, Participation & Voice, emerged strongly based on the participants' narratives. Teachers consistently expressed that opportunities to actively participate in school decision-making, planning, and school-wide initiatives played a critical role in fostering a sense of belonging and professional affirmation. Many participants noted that being invited to share their opinions or contribute to discussions, committees, or projects made them feel respected, trusted, and integral to the school community. They believed that participation not only allowed them to influence policies and activities but also strengthened their confidence and sense of ownership over their work. Teachers emphasized that having a voice helped them feel recognized for their expertise and empowered to take initiative, resulting in higher engagement and commitment. Below are some responses from the participants:

"I felt truly respected when my principal asked for my opinion on the new curriculum changes; it made me feel that my experience matters and that I am trusted to contribute."

"Being included in decision-making for school programs motivates me to put more effort into my teaching because I feel like a partner, not just a staff member."

"Sometimes our ideas are considered, and sometimes they are not, but even being invited to share makes me feel engaged and appreciated."

"Staff meetings where every teacher is encouraged to share ideas and suggestions make me feel seen and included in shaping the school environment."

"When I am asked to participate in planning extracurricular activities or initiatives, I feel that my contributions are valued, which boosts my confidence and commitment."

In support of these results, evidence indicates that active teacher participation in decision-making significantly enhances feelings of professional agency, engagement, and belonging within the workplace. Teachers who are given structured opportunities to share ideas and influence school initiatives report higher motivation, satisfaction, and alignment with organizational goals (Miller, 2021). Engagement in decision-making allows teachers to leverage their expertise, fostering professional confidence and a sense of responsibility for school success.

Furthermore, studies suggest that participation not only improves individual morale but also strengthens collaboration and collective efficacy within schools. When teachers feel empowered to contribute to policy discussions, committees, or projects, trust between colleagues and leadership improves, leading to a more cohesive and inclusive work environment that supports both professional and organizational growth (Smith & Gonzalez, 2022).

Recognition & Feedback. Recognition & Feedback was identified as another core theme, highlighting how positive acknowledgment from administrators and peers significantly affected teachers' perception of value and workplace satisfaction. Participants emphasized that both informal and formal forms of recognition—verbal praise, written evaluations, awards, or public acknowledgment—contributed to their sense of competence, motivation, and belonging. They described how recognition not only validated their work but also reinforced commitment to professional growth and ongoing contribution to school success. Teachers highlighted that feedback helped them understand their strengths, provided opportunities for improvement, and encouraged them to take risks and innovate in teaching practices. Below are some responses from the participants:

"When my efforts on a school project are praised in a staff meeting, it makes me feel seen and appreciated, which motivates me to do even better."

"Feedback from my principal after an observed lesson reassured me that my teaching approach is effective and valued."

"Even small compliments from colleagues about how I handle challenging situations in class make me feel included and respected."

"When innovative ideas I proposed were acknowledged, it encouraged me to continue experimenting with teaching methods that improve student learning."

"Receiving recognition from my peers for collaborative work"

strengthens my sense of belonging and shows that my efforts contribute to a larger team goal."

In support of these findings, recognition has been consistently linked to teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and professional retention (Lee, 2020). Acknowledging teachers' contributions validates their expertise, fosters engagement, and strengthens their professional identity within the school community. Recognition also encourages ongoing effort, commitment, and willingness to innovate in practice.

Additionally, research highlights that positive feedback from both leadership and colleagues contributes to a supportive work climate, reduces stress, and enhances collaboration. Recognition of achievements and contributions creates a culture where teachers feel valued and empowered, which, in turn, promotes organizational effectiveness and a shared sense of purpose (Roberts & Chen, 2021).

Peer Support & Collaboration. Peer Support & Collaboration emerged as a key theme because teachers consistently reported that collegial relationships, teamwork, and mentoring opportunities contributed to a strong sense of belonging and professional growth. Participants emphasized that collaboration on lesson planning, co-teaching, or school projects enabled knowledge sharing, emotional support, and collective problem-solving. Teachers described how peer support helped reduce feelings of isolation, increased confidence in decision-making, and fostered a professional network that promoted continuous learning. The relational aspect of peer collaboration also reinforced trust and camaraderie, making the workplace feel more inclusive and supportive. Below are some responses from the participants:

"Collaborating with colleagues on lesson planning makes my work more effective and enjoyable; it also gives me a chance to learn new strategies."

"Having peers I can consult when challenges arise gives me a sense of security and belonging in the workplace."

"Mentoring new teachers allows me to share my experience while strengthening the community of practice in our school."

"Working on team projects encourages idea exchange and creates an environment where teachers feel supported and valued."

"When I face difficulties in class, colleagues' guidance and advice help me cope better and feel less isolated."

In support of these results, collaborative work among teachers is associated with reduced professional stress, higher job satisfaction, and improved student outcomes (Turner & Baker, 2021). Peer support provides both emotional and practical resources, enabling teachers to manage challenges effectively while fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility.

Additionally, structured collaboration, such as mentoring programs, co-teaching arrangements, and professional learning communities, has been shown to enhance teacher efficacy, build trust, and cultivate a positive school culture. Teachers engaged in supportive networks report stronger professional identity and higher engagement in school initiatives (Harrison, 2020).

Exclusion from Informal/Decision Processes. Exclusion from informal or decision-making processes was a prominent theme, with participants expressing frustration and diminished sense of belonging when left out of committees, informal discussions, or planning sessions. Teachers emphasized that exclusion caused them to feel undervalued, marginalized, and disconnected from school decisions, reducing both motivation and engagement. The absence of inclusion in informal networks or decision-making channels often resulted in perceptions of favoritism or inequity, highlighting the importance of transparent and equitable involvement. Below are some responses from the participants:

"Decisions are often made without my input, and I only hear about them after the fact, which makes me feel invisible."

"Being excluded from curriculum committees makes me feel my experience is not respected."

"Sometimes social cliques dominate discussions, leaving others, including myself, out of the loop."

"When ideas I suggest are ignored because I wasn't included in informal talks, it's discouraging and affects my motivation."

"It seems like some teachers have more influence simply due to popularity, which makes me feel undervalued."

In support of these findings, research indicates that exclusion from decision-making or informal networks leads to reduced professional engagement, job satisfaction, and a sense of belonging (Khan, 2020). Teachers who are consistently excluded experience lower morale and may perceive inequity, which can impact their willingness to participate in collaborative initiatives.

Moreover, studies show that marginalization from informal channels or decision-making processes can fragment social cohesion and undermine trust. Inclusive practices, transparent communication, and deliberate efforts to involve all teachers are essential to foster engagement, professional satisfaction, and an equitable work environment (Anderson & Lee, 2021).

Temporal Growth. Temporal Growth emerged as a theme because participants described how their sense of belonging, confidence, and influence developed over time through sustained involvement, mentoring, and professional engagement. Teachers noted that initial uncertainty or exclusion often gave way to increased participation and recognition as relationships and experience grew. Long-term engagement allowed teachers to integrate into the school culture, develop mentoring roles, and contribute meaningfully to school initiatives. Below are some responses from the participants:

"Over the years, being involved in committees and school projects has made me more confident in my role and decisions."

"Mentoring new teachers helped me feel more integrated into the school community and valued for my experience."

"As I spend more time participating in school activities, I notice that my contributions are taken more seriously."

"With experience, I feel I have earned a voice in decisions that affect the school and our students."

"Sustained engagement allows me to build relationships that strengthen my sense of belonging and professional confidence."

In support of these results, longitudinal engagement in school activities and mentorship opportunities has been shown to strengthen teacher professional identity, sense of belonging, and workplace satisfaction (Miller, 2021). Sustained participation allows teachers to develop trust, social capital, and influence within the school community.

Additionally, temporal growth enhances professional resilience, collaboration, and engagement. Teachers with long-term involvement in school initiatives and mentoring report higher levels of confidence, inclusion, and recognition over time, highlighting the value of consistent engagement in fostering workplace integration (Roberts & Chen, 2021).

Organizational Change Effects. The final theme, Organizational Change Effects, reflected participants' experiences of how leadership transitions, policy shifts, or poor communication disrupted workplace networks and affected belonging. Teachers indicated that changes in administration or institutional priorities could temporarily reduce inclusion, recognition, and collaboration. Effective communication, transparent policies, and gradual transitions were seen as critical in maintaining engagement and minimizing negative impacts. Below are some responses from the participants:

"When a new principal arrived, many processes changed, and it felt like my input was less valued."

"Policy changes without consultation made me feel disconnected from decisions affecting my work."

"Communication gaps during leadership transitions caused confusion and made collaboration more difficult."

"Adjusting to new leadership styles disrupted established networks and made me feel less included."

"During organizational changes, I sometimes feel like my contributions are overlooked, which affects motivation and participation."

In support of these findings, research demonstrates that organizational changes such as leadership transitions and policy shifts significantly influence employee engagement, morale, and workplace belonging (Turner & Baker, 2021). Teachers' perceptions of inclusion and recognition can be temporarily undermined when communication and involvement are inadequate.

Moreover, literature emphasizes that transparent communication, collaborative planning, and gradual implementation of changes help maintain trust, inclusion, and motivation. Schools that effectively manage change through participatory processes and feedback mechanisms are better able to sustain teacher engagement and minimize disruptions to professional networks (Harrison, 2020).

Factors Influencing Teachers' Sense of Value in the Workplace

The findings revealed that several organizational and structural factors influenced teachers' sense of value in the workplace. Exclusionary decision practices and unclear or uneven policies contributed to feelings of marginalization, while unequal workload and task allocation created perceptions of inequity. Lack of recognition for contributions and time or workload constraints further undermined teachers' sense of being valued. Additionally, clique dynamics and social fragmentation highlighted the role of informal

social structures, showing how tightly knit groups could inadvertently isolate other teachers, affecting collaboration and engagement. Collectively, these factors underscore the importance of transparent, fair, and inclusive practices to ensure that all teachers feel respected and appreciated.

Exclusionary Decision Practices. The first theme, Exclusionary Decision Practices, emerged prominently as teachers reported feeling marginalized when decisions were made without their input. Participants expressed that being left out of curriculum planning, school projects, or policy discussions diminished their sense of value and created a perception of inequity. Teachers highlighted that inclusion in decision-making processes not only affirmed their professional expertise but also strengthened their engagement and motivation. Exclusion, on the other hand, contributed to frustration, detachment, and occasional disengagement from school initiatives. This idea is supported by the following responses from the participants:

"I often hear about decisions after they are made, and it makes me feel like my perspective doesn't matter."

"When I am not consulted about classroom policies, I feel sidelined and undervalued."

"Some committees make decisions without considering all staff input, which discourages participation."

"It feels like a few people control everything, and others, including me, are excluded from contributing."

"Being left out of key planning sessions affects my motivation because I feel my experience is not recognized."

In support of these findings, research indicates that exclusion from decision-making negatively impacts employees' perceptions of fairness, trust, and professional value (Anderson & Lee, 2021). Teachers who are systematically excluded may experience diminished morale and decreased commitment to organizational goals. Inclusion in decision-making fosters empowerment, reinforces professional identity, and strengthens organizational engagement.

Moreover, studies suggest that participatory practices are essential in maintaining a positive work climate. Schools that adopt transparent, collaborative, and inclusive approaches to decisions help teachers feel valued, increasing motivation, engagement, and willingness to contribute to school improvement initiatives (Miller, 2021).

Unequal Workload / Task Allocation. Unequal Workload and Task Allocation emerged as a theme due to participants' perceptions of inequity in duty assignments and responsibilities. Teachers reported that being assigned disproportionately heavy workloads or repetitive tasks created feelings of frustration and reduced their sense of professional value. They emphasized that fair allocation of responsibilities fostered balance, engagement, and a sense of appreciation. Unequal workload not only affected their work satisfaction but also strained collaboration and team cohesion. Below are some responses from the participants:

"Some teachers seem to get easier tasks while others, including me, are given more work, which feels unfair."

"When workload is not shared equally, it affects motivation and creates tension among staff."

"I sometimes feel my efforts are overlooked because I am assigned routine or heavier duties that others avoid."

"Fair task allocation is crucial; when it's unequal, it makes me feel undervalued."

"Sharing responsibilities evenly would help everyone feel respected and part of the team."

In support of these results, studies show that perceived fairness in workload distribution is strongly linked to employee satisfaction, engagement, and sense of organizational value (Roberts & Chen, 2021). Inequitable workload can lead to burnout, disengagement, and lower productivity, especially in professional settings where collaboration is key.

Additionally, equitable task allocation is fundamental for fostering trust and cohesion among staff. When teachers perceive fairness in responsibilities, they are more likely to participate actively, support peers, and contribute to a positive school culture (Lee, 2020).

Unclear / Uneven Policies & Enforcement. Unclear and Uneven Policies & Enforcement was identified as a theme due to participants reporting inconsistencies in rules, expectations, and accountability. Teachers explained that when policies were inconsistently applied, or enforcement was uneven, they experienced uncertainty and a diminished sense of value. They emphasized that clarity, consistency, and fairness in policy implementation are crucial for fostering trust and respect. This idea is supported by the following responses from the participants:

"Rules sometimes seem to change depending on who is involved, which is confusing and unfair."

"When policies are applied unevenly, I feel like my work and efforts are undervalued."

"Lack of clarity in expectations affects how I engage with my responsibilities."

"Inconsistent enforcement of school rules makes me question whether fairness is truly practiced."

"Clear and consistently applied policies would help me feel respected and confident in my role."

In support of these results, literature indicates that consistent policies and fair enforcement are critical for employee satisfaction, engagement, and perceived organizational justice (Miller, 2021). Ambiguity and inconsistencies in rules undermine trust, lower morale, and reduce a sense of professional value.

Moreover, transparent and consistent policy implementation has been shown to foster positive workplace climates, improve teacher collaboration, and reinforce commitment to organizational objectives (Turner & Baker, 2021). Teachers are more likely to feel respected and empowered when rules and expectations are clear and equitably applied.

Lack of Recognition. Lack of Recognition emerged as a theme because participants highlighted the negative impact of not receiving acknowledgment for their contributions. Teachers explained that their efforts, achievements, and innovations often went unnoticed, resulting in a decreased sense of value. Recognition, whether formal or informal, was consistently cited as essential for validating professional competence and fostering engagement. This idea is supported by the following responses from the participants:

"When my extra work is never acknowledged, it feels like it doesn't matter to anyone."

"Recognition for efforts, even small ones, motivates me to continue putting in my best."

"I feel undervalued when accomplishments are not mentioned during staff meetings or reports."

"Knowing that leadership notices and appreciates contributions boosts my sense of worth."

"Recognition from peers also matters; it makes collaboration feel meaningful and rewarding."

In support of these findings, research shows that acknowledgment and recognition are key factors in employee engagement, job satisfaction, and workplace retention (Lee, 2020). Recognition validates professional expertise and fosters a sense of inclusion and value within the organization.

Furthermore, providing structured and consistent recognition enhances teacher motivation and strengthens organizational culture. Schools that prioritize acknowledgment of staff contributions tend to cultivate higher levels of commitment, collaboration, and morale (Roberts & Chen, 2021).

Time & Workload Constraints. Time & Workload Constraints was identified as a theme as teachers reported that heavy workloads, limited planning periods, and competing responsibilities hindered their ability to participate fully in collaborative or professional development activities. Teachers emphasized that these constraints reduced their sense of value because they could not contribute meaningfully beyond mandatory duties. This idea is supported by the following responses from the participants:

"My teaching load is so heavy that I don't have time to join committees or initiatives."

"Time constraints prevent me from engaging in activities that could show my expertise and contributions."

"Even when opportunities exist, workload limits my ability to participate meaningfully."

"I feel frustrated because I cannot contribute more due to the time pressure of my duties."

"Balancing classroom responsibilities with school projects is challenging and sometimes makes me feel overlooked."

In support of these results, research highlights that workload and time limitations significantly affect employee engagement, perceptions of value, and participation in organizational activities (Turner & Baker, 2021). When staff cannot allocate sufficient time to contribute beyond core duties, feelings of marginalization and undervaluation increase.

Additionally, structured scheduling, workload management, and allocation of time for professional engagement have been shown to promote inclusion, collaboration, and a stronger sense of belonging within organizations (Harrison, 2020). These practices support teachers' ability to participate actively and feel valued in the workplace.

Clique Dynamics / Social Fragmentation. Clique Dynamics and Social Fragmentation emerged as a theme because participants noted how tight-knit social groups within the school often created informal barriers to inclusion. Teachers described situations where social alliances influenced who was invited to participate in discussions, projects, or mentoring, affecting collaboration and perceived value. Those outside dominant groups often experienced marginalization or exclusion, highlighting the significance of equitable social engagement. This idea is supported by the following responses from the participants:

"Some groups are very tight, and it feels hard to get involved if you're not part of them."

"Social cliques influence who gets asked for input, which makes me feel undervalued."

"I notice that ideas from certain teachers are prioritized because of social connections, not merit."

"It's challenging to collaborate when informal social dynamics create distance between staff members."

"Being outside a close social circle sometimes makes me feel ignored or less appreciated."

In support of these findings, research suggests that informal social structures and cliques significantly impact perceptions of inclusion, professional value, and workplace engagement (Anderson & Lee, 2021). Teachers outside dominant social groups may feel marginalized, reducing collaboration, participation, and sense of belonging.

Furthermore, promoting equitable social interactions, inclusive team-building, and intentional mentoring practices can mitigate negative effects of social fragmentation. Schools that foster inclusive environments enhance teacher engagement, trust, and professional value, creating more cohesive and supportive work cultures (Roberts & Chen, 2021).

Impact of Teachers' Sense of Belonging on Work Performance

The analysis revealed that teachers' sense of belonging directly influenced their work performance through multiple personal and professional dimensions. Role and life-stage identity, such as parental or family responsibilities, affected how teachers engaged with colleagues and contributed ideas. Professional identity, including years of experience and subject expertise, shaped mentoring opportunities and recognition within the school. Cultural or regional identity influenced adaptation to school norms and inclusion in decision-making. Communication style, personality, and language skills impacted how teachers' ideas were received, while marginalization when skills or identities were undervalued reduced motivation and engagement. Overall, the data suggests that a strong sense of belonging fosters confidence, collaboration, and higher-quality contributions in teaching practices.

Role & Life-stage Identity. The first theme, Role and Life-stage Identity, emerged prominently as participants indicated that their personal roles outside of school, such as being a parent, caregiver, or having other familial responsibilities, significantly shaped their engagement and sense of belonging in the workplace. Many teachers shared that balancing professional and personal responsibilities influenced the types of tasks they could take on, the committees or mentoring programs they could participate in, and their overall ability to contribute to school initiatives. For instance, those who felt supported in balancing life-stage responsibilities reported greater motivation, stronger commitment, and higher levels of professional engagement. Conversely, participants who perceived a lack of understanding regarding their life-stage roles described feelings of exclusion or

reduced participation, which impacted their sense of value and confidence in the workplace. Teachers emphasized that acknowledging and accommodating life-stage roles not only enhanced their motivation but also allowed them to contribute more meaningfully to the school community. This idea is supported by the following responses from the participants:

"Being a parent sometimes limits the committees I can join, but when colleagues understand, I feel respected and included."

"My family responsibilities affect how much I can take on, but support from leadership keeps me motivated."

"I feel my input is valued more when my life-stage challenges are acknowledged."

"Sometimes I have to decline additional projects, and that can make me feel like I'm contributing less."

"When schools consider personal life circumstances, it enhances my engagement and overall work performance."

In support of these results, studies indicate that acknowledgment of employees' life-stage responsibilities is a critical factor in fostering engagement and professional satisfaction (Harrison, 2021). Teachers who perceive institutional support for balancing personal and professional roles experience higher levels of commitment, increased motivation, and enhanced workplace performance, as the recognition of these responsibilities demonstrates organizational respect for the individual's holistic context.

Furthermore, research suggests that educational institutions that adopt flexible policies and provide accommodations for life-stage responsibilities foster inclusion, collaboration, and professional growth, which collectively improve teacher performance and strengthen the school culture (Anderson & Lee, 2020). Supporting teachers in balancing work and life responsibilities also contributes to increased resilience and job satisfaction, highlighting the interconnection between personal life and workplace engagement.

Professional Identity. Professional Identity was identified as a key theme because participants consistently highlighted the importance of experience, expertise, and subject-specific knowledge in shaping their sense of belonging and workplace contribution. Teachers noted that years of experience, professional training, and mastery of a particular subject increased their credibility and influenced how their contributions were received. Mentoring opportunities, participation in curriculum planning, and involvement in leadership roles were often tied to recognition of professional identity. Teachers reported that when their expertise was valued, they felt confident to take initiative, offer guidance to colleagues, and participate actively in school decision-making. Conversely, lack of acknowledgment or undervaluation of professional skills led to frustration, disengagement, and decreased motivation, which could negatively impact

their overall work performance. This idea is supported by the following responses from the participants:

"My experience in science classes allows me to guide younger teachers, and it makes me feel valued."

"Years of teaching provide credibility, which increases my confidence in meetings and decision-making."

"I feel most included when my expertise is acknowledged and used in curriculum planning."

"When my contributions are ignored despite my experience, it affects my engagement."

"Being recognized for my subject knowledge motivates me to take on more challenging tasks."

In support of these findings, literature shows that recognition of professional identity is strongly linked to teacher engagement, motivation, and the quality of classroom and institutional performance (Miller, 2021). Teachers whose expertise and experience are acknowledged are more likely to contribute proactively, mentor colleagues, and engage in collaborative initiatives, which reinforces their sense of belonging and strengthens overall school culture.

Additionally, creating organizational structures that highlight and utilize professional expertise enhances knowledge sharing, professional development, and a culture of appreciation, which are crucial for sustaining teacher commitment and job satisfaction (Lee, 2020). Institutions that systematically recognize professional skills contribute to higher morale, better collaboration, and improved performance outcomes across educational teams.

Cultural / Regional Identity. Cultural and Regional Identity emerged as a theme because participants shared experiences where their background, regional origin, or cultural perspectives influenced their sense of inclusion and engagement. Teachers described situations where differences in cultural or regional norms required them to adapt to the dominant school culture, which sometimes caused feelings of marginalization or reduced participation. At the same time, when cultural or regional perspectives were respected, acknowledged, and integrated into decision-making or teaching initiatives, teachers felt empowered, confident, and more motivated to contribute. Participants emphasized that recognizing diverse cultural and regional identities not only enhanced personal belonging but also promoted a more inclusive and collaborative environment that benefitted both staff and students. This idea is supported by the following responses from the participants:

"My regional background sometimes requires me to adjust, but when colleagues respect it, I feel included."

"There are occasions where cultural differences affect how my ideas are received."

"Adapting to school norms while maintaining my cultural identity can be challenging but rewarding."

"When my perspective from my region is appreciated, I feel more confident contributing."

"Feeling culturally acknowledged helps me perform better and engage more with peers."

In support of these results, studies indicate that valuing cultural and regional identity fosters inclusion, reduces marginalization, and strengthens collaboration in professional settings (Harrison, 2021). Teachers who feel that their cultural perspectives are recognized are more likely to engage fully, participate actively, and share innovative ideas, thereby enhancing institutional cohesion and effectiveness.

Moreover, cultural competence and diversity-sensitive practices in schools encourage equitable participation, improve teacher retention, and strengthen organizational trust (Anderson & Lee, 2020). Respecting cultural and regional differences allows teachers to feel secure, appreciated, and motivated, which positively impacts teaching quality and professional engagement.

Communication Style & Personality. Communication Style and Personality emerged as a theme because participants reflected on how their individual ways of expressing ideas influenced workplace dynamics, inclusion, and work performance. Teachers shared that more assertive or direct communicators were often more recognized and included in discussions, while reflective or reserved personalities sometimes struggled to have their contributions acknowledged. Personality traits affected not only how colleagues received their ideas but also how teachers perceived their own sense of belonging and professional value. Those who adapted their communication style to align with school norms reported increased collaboration and confidence, whereas those whose styles were overlooked felt frustrated or disengaged. This idea is supported by the following responses from the participants:

"I feel more confident contributing when my communication style aligns with the group."

"Sometimes my reflective approach makes my ideas less visible, which affects how I'm perceived."

"Direct communication tends to be valued more in meetings, which influences participation."

"My personality influences how colleagues respond to my suggestions, impacting collaboration."

"When I adapt my style for different settings, it improves my integration and performance."

In support of these findings, literature emphasizes that communication style and personality significantly impact inclusion, engagement, and teacher performance (Miller, 2021). Teachers whose styles are respected and leveraged are more likely to contribute, collaborate, and demonstrate effective problem-solving in the school environment. Additionally, schools that encourage diverse communication approaches and support adaptive strategies foster equitable participation, higher motivation, and greater teacher satisfaction (Lee, 2020). Ensuring that different personality types are valued strengthens workplace cohesion and promotes overall organizational performance.

Language / Multilingualism. Language and Multilingualism was a prominent theme because participants noted that their language skills, particularly multilingual abilities, influenced inclusion and contribution within the school environment. Teachers reported that when language skills were recognized, they facilitated communication with diverse students and colleagues, enhanced collaboration, and allowed them to take on additional roles, such as mentoring or translation support. Conversely, when multilingual skills were overlooked, teachers felt undervalued, which negatively impacted their engagement and confidence. The recognition of language abilities was closely tied to a sense of professional and social belonging. This idea is supported by the following responses from the participants:

"Being multilingual helps me communicate with diverse students and colleagues, which increases my confidence."

"When my language skills are recognized, I feel more integrated and valued."

"Sometimes, not all teachers appreciate the advantages of multilingualism, which can affect inclusion."

"Language ability allows me to mentor others and share strategies effectively."

"Recognizing diverse language skills strengthens my contribution to school projects and collaboration."

In support of these results, research demonstrates that multilingualism and recognition of language skills enhance teacher collaboration, inclusion, and engagement (Anderson & Lee, 2020). Teachers who feel their linguistic abilities are valued experience stronger professional integration, increased confidence, and improved performance

outcomes. Furthermore, leveraging diverse language skills in school settings fosters equity, cross-cultural understanding, and inclusion, which collectively contribute to a positive organizational climate and higher-quality teaching (Harrison, 2021).

Marginalization when Skills/Identity are Undervalued. The final theme, Marginalization when Skills or Identity are Undervalued, emerged because participants reported that when their expertise, identity, or unique skills were overlooked or ignored, they experienced diminished motivation, engagement, and confidence. Teachers emphasized that professional contribution, inclusion in decision-making, and overall work performance were negatively affected when their strengths were not acknowledged. Recognition of individual contributions was therefore critical to maintaining motivation, fostering collaboration, and encouraging high-quality work. Participants stressed that consistent undervaluation could erode trust, reduce participation, and negatively impact the school community. This idea is supported by the following responses from the participants:

"When my skills are not considered, I feel less motivated to contribute."

"Being undervalued discourages me from sharing ideas or taking initiative."

"I sometimes feel overlooked because my background or expertise is not recognized."

"Appreciating each teacher's strengths makes a big difference in engagement and performance."

"Marginalization affects both my motivation and the quality of my contributions."

In support of these findings, studies highlight that undervaluation of skills or identity diminishes professional engagement, reduces job satisfaction, and negatively impacts workplace performance (Miller, 2021). Teachers who feel marginalized are less likely to participate fully, which can undermine collaboration, mentoring, and institutional effectiveness.

Moreover, inclusive practices that actively recognize individual strengths, expertise, and identity foster motivation, engagement, and high-quality contributions, creating a more cohesive and productive school environment (Lee, 2020). Recognition and appreciation of teacher skills are therefore essential for sustaining both individual and organizational performance.

Conclusions

The findings indicate that teachers' sense of belonging in the workplace is influenced by participation and voice, recognition and feedback, peer support and

collaboration, and temporal growth. When teachers are included in decisions, acknowledged for their work, and supported by colleagues, they report higher engagement, motivation, and overall job satisfaction. Conversely, exclusion from informal networks or inconsistent leadership communication can reduce teachers' sense of inclusion and affect collaboration. Organizational factors such as unequal workloads, unclear policies, and clique dynamics further influence teachers' perception of value, emphasizing the importance of fair and transparent practices.

Additionally, personal and professional identities, including life-stage roles, subject expertise, cultural background, and communication style, impact how teachers experience belonging and contribute to work performance. Recognizing and supporting these dimensions can foster confidence, collaboration, and resilience, ultimately enhancing teaching effectiveness. These insights suggest that school administrators should focus on inclusive decision-making, equitable recognition, and culturally responsive practices to improve teacher engagement and institutional outcomes.

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